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Biography of Philip Larkin

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Philip Arthur Larkin (9 August 1922 – 2 December 1985) is widely regarded as one of the greatest English poets of the latter half of the twentieth century. His first book of poetry , The North Ship , was published in 1945 , followed by two novels , Jill (1946) and A Girl in Winter (1947) , but he came to prominence in 1955 with the publication of his second collection of poems , The Less Deceived , followed by The Whitsun Weddings (1964) and High Windows (1974). He contributed to The Daily Telegraph as its jazz critic from 1961 to 1971 , articles gathered together in All What Jazz : A Record Diary 1961-71 (1985), and he edited the Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse (1973). He was offered , but declined , the position of poet laureate in 1984 , following the death of John Betjeman.

After graduating from Oxford in 1943 with a first in English language and literature , Larkin became a librarian. It was during the thirty years he served as university librarian at the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull that he produced the greater part of his published work. His poems are marked by what Andrew Motion calls a very English , glum accuracy about

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emotions , places and relationships , and what Donald Davie described as lowered sights and diminished expectations. Eric Homberger called him "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket" – Larkin himself said that deprivation for him was what daffodils were for Wordsworth. Influenced by W. H. Auden , W. B. Yeats , and Thomas Hardy , his poems are highly – structured but flexible verse forms . They were described by Jean Hartley , the ex- wife of Larkin's publisher George Hartley (The Marvell Press) , as a "piquant mixture of lyricism and discontent" though anthologist Keith Tuma writes that there is more to Larkin's work than its reputation dour pessimism suggests.

Larkin's public persona was that of the non-sense , solitary Englishman who disliked fame and had no patience for the trappings of the public literary life. The posthumous publication by Anthony Thwaite in 1992 of his letters trigerred controversy about his personal life and reactioinary political views , described by John Banville as hair-raising , but also in places hilarious. Lisa Jardine called him a " casual , habitual racist , and an easy misogynist, " though the academic John Osborne argued in 2008 that "the worst that anyone has discovered about Larkin are some crass letters and a taste for porn softer than what passes for mainstream entertainment". Despite the controversy , Larkin was chosen in a 2003 Poetry Book Society survey , almost two decades after his death , as Britain's Best loved poet of the previous 50 years , and in 2008 The Times named him Britain's greatest post-war writer.

In 2010, a number of cultural events marked the quarter century since Larkin's Death in 1985. Larkin's adopted home city of Kingston upon Hull is marking the anniversary with the Larkin 25 Festival including the public art event Larkin with Toads . The festival will culminate with the unveiling of a statue to Larkin inspired by the poem , "The Whitsun Weddings". Larkin's poems are appearing on Hull buses and a bus has been named 'Philip Larkin' in his honour by his biographer Sir Andrew Motion , a former English Lecturer at Larkin's workplace, the University of Hull. A compilation of Larkin's favourite jazz recordings has been released to mark the 25th anniversary of his death.

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Philip Larkin, an eminent writer in postwar Great Britain, was commonly referred to as "England's *other* Poet Laureate" until his death in 1985. Indeed, when the position of laureate became vacant in 1984, many poets and critics favored Larkin's appointment, but the shy, provincial author preferred to avoid the limelight. An "artist of the first rank" in the words of *Southern Review* contributor John Press, Larkin achieved acclaim on the strength of an extremely small body of work—just over one hundred pages of poetry in four slender volumes that appeared at almost decade-long intervals. These collections, especially *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings*, and*High Windows*, present "a poetry from which even people who distrust poetry, most people, can take comfort and delight," according to X. J. Kennedy in the *New Criterion.*Larkin employed the traditional tools of poetry—rhyme, stanza, and meter—to explore the often uncomfortable or terrifying experiences thrust upon common people in the modern age. As Alan Brownjohn notes in *Philip Larkin*, the poet produced without fanfare "the most technically brilliant and resonantly beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing and approachable, body of verse of any English poet in the last twenty-five years."

Despite his wide popularity, Larkin "shied from publicity, rarely consented to interviews or readings, cultivated his image as right-wing curmudgeon and grew depressed at his fame," according to J.D. McClatchy in the *New York Times Book Review.* To support himself, he worked as a professional librarian for more than forty years, writing in his spare time. In that manner he authored two novels, *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*, two collections of criticism, *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-1968* and*Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, and all of his verse. *Phoenix*contributor Alun R. Jones suggests that, as a wage earner at the remote University of Hull, Larkin "avoided the literary, the metropolitan, the group label, and embraced the nonliterary, the provincial, and the purely personal." In *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction,* Peter R. King likewise commends "the scrupulous awareness of a man who refuses to be taken in by inflated notions of either art or life." From his base in Hull, Larkin composed poetry that both reflects the dreariness of postwar provincial England and voices "most articulately and poignantly the spiritual desolation of a world in which men have shed the last rags of religious

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faith that once lent meaning and hope to human lives," according to Press. McClatchy notes Larkin wrote "in clipped, lucid stanzas, about the failures and remorse of age, about stunted lives and spoiled desires." Critics feel that this localization of focus and the colloquial language used to describe settings and emotions endear Larkin to his readers. *Agenda* reviewer George Dekker notes that no living poet "can equal Larkin on his own ground of the familiar English lyric, drastically and poignantly limited in its sense of any life beyond, before or after, life today in England."

Throughout his life, England was Larkin's emotional territory to an eccentric degree. The poet distrusted travel abroad and professed ignorance of foreign literature, including most modern American poetry. He also tried to avoid the cliches of his own culture, such as the tendency to read portent into an artist's childhood. In his poetry and essays, Larkin remembered his early years as "unspent" and "boring," as he grew up the son of a city treasurer in Coventry. Poor eyesight and stuttering plagued Larkin as a youth; he retreated into solitude, read widely, and began to write poetry as a nightly routine. In 1940 he enrolled at Oxford, beginning "a vital stage in his personal and literary development," according to Bruce K. Martin in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. At Oxford Larkin studied English literature and cultivated the friendship of those who shared his special interests, including Kingsley Amis and John Wain. He graduated with first class honors in 1943, and, having to account for himself with the wartime Ministry of Labor, he took a position as librarian in the small Shropshire town of Wellington. While there he wrote both of his novels as well as *The North Ship*, his first volume of poetry. After working at several other university libraries, Larkin moved to Hull in 1955 and began a thirty-year association with the library at the University of Hull. He is still admired for his expansion and modernization of that facility.

The author's *Selected Letters*, edited by Larkin's longtime friend Anthony Thwaite, reveals much about the writer's personal and professional life between 1940 and 1985. *Washington Post Book World* reviewer John Simon notes that the letters are "about intimacy, conviviality, and getting things off one's heaving chest into a heedful ear." He suggests that "these cheerful, despairing,

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frolicsome, often foul-mouthed, grouchy, self-assertive and self-depreciating missives should not be missed by anyone who appreciates Larkin's verse."

In a *Paris Review* interview, Larkin dismissed the notion that he studied the techniques of poets that he admired in order to perfect his craft. Most critics feel, however, that the poems of both William Butler Yeats and Thomas Hardy exerted an influence on Larkin as he sought his own voice. Martin suggests that the pieces in *The North Ship* "reflect an infatuation with Yeatsian models, a desire to emulate the Irishman's music without having undergone the experience upon which it had been based." Hardy's work provided the main impetus to Larkin's mature poetry, according to critics. A biographer in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* claims "Larkin credited his reading of Thomas Hardy's verse for inspiring him to write with greater austerity and to link experiences and emotions with detailed settings." King contends that a close reading of Hardy taught Larkin "that a modern poet could write about the life around him in the language of the society around him. He encouraged [Larkin] to use his poetry to examine the reality of his own life. . . . As a result Larkin abandoned the highly romantic style of *The North Ship*, which had been heavily influenced by the poetry of Yeats, and set out to write from the tensions that underlay his own everyday experiences. Hardy also supported his employment of traditional forms and technique, which Larkin [went] on to use with subtlety and variety." In his work *Philip Larkin*,Martin also claims that Larkin learned from Hardy "that his own life, with its often casual discoveries, could become poems, and that he could legitimately share such experience with his readers. From this lesson [came Larkin's] belief that a poem is better based on something from 'unsorted' experience than on another poem or other art."

Not surprisingly, this viewpoint allied Larkin with the poets of The Movement, a loose association of British writers who "called, implicitly in their poetry and fiction and explicitly in critical essays, for some sort of commonsense return to more traditional techniques," according to Martin in *Philip Larkin.* Martin adds that the rationale for this "antimodernist, antiexperimental stance is their stated concern with clarity: with writing distinguished by precision rather than obscurity. . . .

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[The Movement urged] not an abandonment of emotion, but a mixture of rationality with feeling, of objective control with subjective abandon. Their notion of what they felt the earlier generation of writers, particularly poets, lacked, centered around the ideas of honesty and realism about self and about the outside world." King observes that Larkin "had sympathy with many of the attitudes to poetry represented by The Movement," but this view of the poet's task antedated the beginnings of that group's influence. Nonetheless, in the opinion of *Washington Post Book World* contributor Chad Walsh, Larkin says "seemed to fulfill the credo of the Movement better than anyone else, and he was often singled out, as much for damnation as for praise, by those looking for the ultimate Movement poet." Brownjohn concludes that in the company of The Movement, Larkin's own "distinctive technical skills, the special subtlety in his adaptation of a very personal colloquial mode to the demands of tight forms, were not immediately seen to be outstanding; but his strengths as a craftsman have increasingly come to be regarded as one of the hallmarks of his talent."

Those strengths of craftsmanship and technical skill in Larkin's mature works receive almost universal approval from literary critics. London *Sunday Times* correspondent Ian Hamilton writes: "Supremely among recent poets, [Larkin] was able to accommodate a talking voice to the requirements of strict metres and tight rhymes, and he had a faultless ear for the possibilities of the iambic line." David Timms expresses a similar view in his book entitled *Philip Larkin.* Technically, notes Timms, Larkin was "an extraordinarily various and accomplished poet, a poet who [used] the devices of metre and rhyme for specific effects. . . . His language is never flat, unless he intends it to be so for a particular reason, and his diction is never stereotyped. He [was] always ready . . . to reach across accepted literary boundaries for a word that will precisely express what he intends." As King explains, Larkin's best poems "are rooted in actual experiences and convey a sense of place and situation, people and events, which gives an authenticity to the thoughts that are then usually raised by the poet's observation of the scene. . . . Joined with this strength of careful social observation is a control over tone changes and the expression of developing feelings even within a single poem . . . which is the product of great craftsmanship. To

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these virtues must be added the fact that in all the poems there is a lucidity of language which invites understanding even when the ideas expressed are paradoxical or complex." *New Leader* contributor Pearl K. Bell concludes that Larkin's poetry "fits with unresisting precision into traditional structures, . . . filling them with the melancholy truth of things in the shrunken, vulgarized and parochial England of the 1970s."

If Larkin's style is traditional, the subject matter of his poetry is derived exclusively from modern life. Press contends that Larkin's artistic work "delineates with considerable force and delicacy the pattern of contemporary sensibility, tracing the way in which we respond to our environment, plotting the ebb and flow of the emotional flux within us, embodying in his poetry attitudes of heart and mind that seem peculiarly characteristic of our time: doubt, insecurity, boredom, aimlessness and malaise." A sense that life is a finite prelude to oblivion underlies many of Larkin's poems. King suggests that the work is "a poetry of disappointment, of the destruction of romantic illusions, of man's defeat by time and his own inadequacies," as well as a study of how dreams, hopes, and ideals "are relentlessly diminished by the realities of life." To Larkin, Brownjohn notes, life was never "a matter of blinding revelations, mystical insights, expectations glitteringly fulfilled. Life, for Larkin, and, implicitly, for all of us, is something lived mundanely, with a gradually accumulating certainty that its golden prizes are sheer illusion." Love is one of the supreme deceptions of humankind in Larkin's worldview, as King observes: "Although man clutches at his instinctive belief that only love will comfort, console and sustain him, such a hope is doomed to be denied. A lover's promise is an empty promise and the power to cure suffering through love is a tragic illusion." Stanley Poss in *Western Humanities Review* maintains that Larkin's poems demonstrate "desperate clarity and restraint and besieged common sense. And what they mostly say is, be beginning to despair, despair, despair."

Larkin arrived at his conclusions candidly, concerned to expose evasions so that the reader might stand "naked but honest, 'less deceived' . . . before the realities of life and death," to quote King. Many critics find Larkin withdrawn from his poems, a phenomenon Martin describes in

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the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* thus: "The unmarried observer, a staple in Larkin's poetic world, . . . enjoys only a curious and highly limited kind of communion with those he observes." Jones likewise declares that Larkin's "ironic detachment is comprehensive. Even the intense beauty that his poetry creates is created by balancing on a keen ironic edge." King writes: "A desire not to be fooled by time leads to a concern to maintain vigilance against a whole range of possible evasions of reality. It is partly this which makes Larkin's typical stance one of being to one side of life, watching himself and others with a detached eye." Although *Harvard Advocate* contributor Andrew Sullivan states that the whole tenor of Larkin's work is that of an "irrelevant and impotent spectator," J.D. McClatchy offers the counter suggestion in *Contemporary Literature* that the poetry records and reflects "the imperfect, transitory experiences of the mundane reality that the poet shares with his readers." Larkin himself offered a rather wry description of his accomplishments—an assessment that, despite its levity, links him emotionally to his work. In 1979 he told the *Observer:* "I think writing about unhappiness is probably the source of my popularity, if I have any. . . . Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth."

Critics such as *Dalhousie Review* contributor Roger Bowen find moments of affirmation in Larkin's poetry, notwithstanding its pessimistic and cynical bent. According to Bowen, an overview of Larkin's oeuvre makes evident "that the definition of the poet as a modern anti-hero governed by a sense of his own mortality seems . . . justified. But . . . a sense of vision and a quiet voice of celebration seem to be asserting themselves" in at least some of the poems. Brownjohn admits that Larkin's works take a bleak view of human existence; at the same time, however, they contain "the recurrent reflection that others, particularly the young, might still find happiness in expectation." *Contemporary Literature* essayist James Naremore expands on Larkin's tendency to detach himself from the action in his poems: "From the beginning, Larkin's work has manifested a certain coolness and lack of self-esteem, a need to withdraw from experience; but at the same time it has continued to show his desire for a purely secular type of romance. . . . Larkin is trying to assert his humanity, not deny it. . . . The greatest virtue in Larkin's poetry is not so much his

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suppression of large poetic gestures as his ability to recover an honest sense of joy and beauty." The *New York Times* quotes Larkin as having said that a poem "represents the mastering, even if just for a moment, of the pessimism and the melancholy, and enables you—you the poet, and you, the reader—to go on." King senses this quiet catharsis when he concludes: "Although one's final impression of the poetry is certainly that the chief emphasis is placed on a life 'unspent' in the shadow of 'untruth,' moments of beauty and affirmation are not entirely denied. It is the difficulty of experiencing such moments after one has become so aware of the numerous self-deceptions that man practices on himself to avoid the uncomfortable reality which lies at the heart of Larkin's poetic identity."

Timms claims that Larkin "consistently maintained that a poet should write about those things in life that move him most deeply: if he does not feel deeply about anything, he should not write." Dedicated to reaching out for his readers, the poet was a staunch opponent of modernism in all artistic media. Larkin felt that such cerebral experimentation ultimately creates a barrier between an artist and the audience and provides unnecessary thematic complications. Larkin's "demand for fidelity to experience is supported by his insistence that poetry should both communicate and give pleasure to the reader," King notes, adding: "It would be a mistake to dismiss this attitude as a form of simple literary conservatism. Larkin is not so much expressing an anti-intellectualism as attacking a particular form of artistic snobbery." In *Philip Larkin*, Martin comments that the poet saw the need for poetry to move toward the "paying customer." Therefore, his writings concretize "many of the questions which have perplexed man almost since his beginning but which in modern times have become the province principally of academicians. . . . [Larkin's poetry reflects] his faith in the common reader to recognize and respond to traditional philosophical concerns when stripped of undue abstractions and pretentious labels." Brownjohn finds Larkin eminently successful in his aims: "It is indeed true that many of his readers find pleasure and interest in Larkin's poetry for its apparent accessibility and its cultivation of verse forms that seem reassuringly traditional rather than 'modernist' in respect of rhyme and metre." As Timms

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succinctly notes, originality for Larkin consisted "not in modifying the medium of communication, but in communicating something different."

"Much that is admirable in the best of [Larkin's] work is felt [in *Collected Poems*]: firmness and delicacy of cadence, a definite geography, a mutually fortifying congruence between what the language means to say and what it musically embodies," asserts in the *Observer*. The collection contains Larkin's six previous volumes of poetry as well as eighty-three of his unpublished poems gleaned from notebooks and homemade booklets.

Larkin's output of fiction and essays is hardly more extensive than his poetry. His two novels, *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*, were both published before his twenty-fifth birthday.*New Statesman* correspondent Clive James feels that both novels "seem to point forward to the poetry. Taken in their chronology, they are impressively mature and self-sufficient." James adds that the fiction is so strong that "if Larkin had never written a line of verse, his place as a writer would still have been secure." Although the novels received little critical attention when they first appeared, they have since been judged highly successful. Brownjohn calls *Jill* "one of the better novels written about England during the Second World War, not so much for any conscious documentary effort put into it as for Larkin's characteristic scrupulousness in getting all the background details right." In the *New York Review of Books*, John Bayley notes that*A Girl in Winter* is "a real masterpiece, a quietly gripping novel, dense with the humor that is Larkin's trademark, and also an extended prose poem." Larkin's essay collections, *Required Writing* and *All What Jazz*, are compilations of critical pieces he wrote for periodicals over a thirty-year period, including the jazz record reviews he penned as a music critic for the London *Daily Telegraph.* "Everything Larkin writes is concise, elegant and wholly original," Bayley claims in the *Listener*, "and this is as true of his essays and reviews as it is of his poetry." Elsewhere in the *New York Review of Books*, Bayley comments that *Required Writing* "reveals wide sympathies, deep and trenchant perceptions, a subterraneous grasp of the whole of European culture." And in an essay on *All What*

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Jazz for Anthony Thwaite's *Larkin at Sixty*, James concludes that "no wittier book of criticism has ever been written."

CAREER

Wellington Public Library, Wellington, England, librarian, 1943-46; University College Library, Leicester, England, librarian, 1946-50; Queen's University Library, Belfast, Northern Ireland, sublibrarian, 1950-55; Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull, Hull, England, librarian, 1955-85. Visiting fellow, All Souls College, Oxford, 1970-71; honorary fellow, St. John's College, Oxford, 1973; chair of judges for Booker Prize, 1977; member, British Library Board, 1984-85; member of standing conference of national and university libraries.

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